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Disarmament as a Weapon: Anglo-French Relations and the Problems of Enforcing German Disarmament, 1919–28

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ABSTRACT This article examines the conflicting French and British definitions and policies towards the enforced disarmament of Germany that was agreed upon by the Allies at Versailles. It contrasts the French definition of disarmament, ‘moral disarmament’, which required convincing controls over Germany’s material capability for war and the country’s desire to use force, with the much narrower British view, which sought the rapid dismantling of Berlin’s physical armaments. These irreconcilable views further divided the two countries and fostered differences over intelligence estimates of German power and the role of the League of Nations in German disarmament.

KEY WORDS: disarmament, Versailles, Treaty, League of Nations

The ‘lessons’ of the First World War brought very different definitions of disarmament for each of the victorious powers, just as the conclusion of the armistice in November 1918 brought very different Allied interests and taxonomies to the process of disarming Germany. The enforced disarmament of Germany outlined and ordered by the Treaty of Versailles was an immediate, and important, test of the compromises and concessions of the peace conference, as well as of what Germany would do with the power she retained.

Despite the extensive literature on the Inter-Allied Military Control Commission (IMCC), dating from the moment of its creation, it has received relatively little attention from scholars studying Anglo-French relations and the problems of European disarmament after
Versailles.¹ Set up by the Allies to verify German adherence to the Versailles strictures but now often ignored, the IMCC received a scant three sentences in two recent studies of European disarmament that give considerable attention to Anglo-French relations.² This is unfortunate because the problems and conflicts surrounding the IMCC offer a great deal of insight into the larger problems facing Anglo-French attempts at general disarmament.

This article will examine the almost irreconcilable French and British concepts of enforced disarmament. It will then show the divisive impact of these differing views on three important areas related to the IMCC’s mission: intelligence estimates of German compliance with the Versailles Treaty, the question of post-IMCC verification and inspection of German disarmament, and, briefly, Anglo-French relations during the 1920s.

The enforcement regime could be only as strong as its foundations. Unfortunately the ground upon which the Versailles disarmament regime was built proved incapable of carrying the weight not just of Allied objectives but of their disagreements and a German policy of obstruction that attempted to profit from these disputes. The process of enforced disarmament quickly brought the differing post-war Allied strategies into conflict and so hastened their divisions.

I

The French approach to German disarmament can be summed up in the expression ‘moral disarmament’ – a phrase that cuts a path through the extensive French archives on post-1919 Germany.³ ‘Moral disarmament’ reflected a uniquely French perspective on the problems facing France and the international community in the post-war world. Its organizing principle was the continued German threat. The armistice and Versailles had not dealt with the essential danger posed by Germany, which amounted to an unholy combination of geography, demography, economics and nationalism. Germany’s strength and danger was its location next to France in the heart of Europe, its

¹IMCC studies have tended to focus on Germany. See, for example, Michael Salewski, Entwaffnung und Militärkontrolle in Deutschland, 1918–1927 (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag 1966).
population of well over 60 million people, its economic and technical
dynamism in large part untouched by the devastation of 1914–18, and,
perhaps most importantly, the powerful nationalist sentiment that was
believed to be responsible for repeatedly putting the country on a path
to confrontation and war. The arrival of peace brought the possibility of
German disarmament, a process that for the French required the
dismantlement of each of these components of the German war machine.
The physical disarmament of Germany was essential, but only as a
precursor to true ‘moral disarmament’ and thus security for France.

The idea of ‘moral disarmament’ was based on Germany’s ‘military
spirit’. France’s political and military leadership repeatedly evoked
their concerns about German ‘spirit’ during and after the negotiations
at Versailles. They were fearful of the continued German threat and
uneasy with the comparison it offered with an exhausted and isolated
France. From as early as 1919 French military intelligence, the
Deuxième Bureau, reported on Germany’s inevitable return, because a
key ‘lesson’ of the First World War, the strength of German militarism,
was part of a larger historical truth stretching back at least a century:

Even more serious the old spirit, one instant gone, tends to be
reborn . . . Germany does not seem to have the desire to submit to
the peace conditions concerning the military clauses on effectives.
The example of 1806 is there to warn us that ‘the future is a
perpetual recommencement’.

Versailles ran against ‘the Prussian mentality’, which was thought to be
still very much present in the nascent Weimar Republic. A Prussia that
in the nineteenth century had violated an agreement with Napoleon to
limit its troop strength would do the same over a century later with the
Third Republic and her Allies. The Treaty could not ‘dissolve the old
warrior spirit’ of the Germans since this entailed an exceptionally long

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4SHAT, 7N3530, no.1, ‘Note sur la réduction des armements’, 9 Nov. 1920; AN
[Archives nationales, Paris], C/14632, Assemblée Nationale, CAE [Commission des
Affaires Étrangères], 12 Feb. 1920.
5SHAT, 1N21, Procès-verbal, Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre, 30 Mar. 1925; 2N5,
no.2, procès-verbal, Conseil Supérieur de la Défense Nationale, 22 Oct. 1920; 2N5,
no.3, ‘Résumé de la situation Allemande’, 13 Dec. 1920; 1K129, Fond Foch, Cahier E,
Foch diary, 2 June 1920; and AAN [archives of the Assemblée Nationale now on
deposit at the AN], Assemblée Nationale, CAE, 17 Feb. 1920 and 9 Mar. 1923. On the
comparison, see Andrew Barros, ‘France and the German Menace, 1919–1928’ (Ph.D.
diss., University of Cambridge 2001) Ch.1; and Mona L. Siegel, The Moral
6AMAE [Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris], Série Z, Allemagne,
and profound transformation of German society. Powerful French stereotypes of German order, discipline and nationalism, reinforced by the ordeal of the war, were clearly in evidence. If one takes into account the lingering influence of these types of images of Germans today, one begins to understand just what force they had for the French in the early 1920s, who had yet to find peace in victory.

While it is a somewhat unfair generalization, France’s approach to German disarmament was one in which the bar was set impossibly high. Any resistance, any failure to comply with the Allies, was evidence of a lack of German ‘moral disarmament’. Anything that increased Germany’s ‘war potential’ – and the definition after 1918 of what constituted a country’s military potential was significantly wider than in 1914 – threatened the disarmament process. Economic development, any policy solidifying the power of the German state, or anything that would allow Germany to quickly escape the long-term Allied control that ‘moral disarmament’ required was destabilizing.

To truly disarm, Germany first had to let go of her immediate military potential in order, over time, to surrender her long-term intention to go to war. The French diplomat René Massigli, who served as Secretary-General of the Council of Ambassadors, which was responsible for the implementation of the Versailles regime, explained the problem in a letter to a colleague in Berlin in April 1920: ‘the commencement of everything is the disarmament of the Reichswehr. As long as Berlin has not first understood this truth we will not arrive at anything.’ German compliance was a measure not just of her willingness to give up the physical underpinnings of power, her war matériel, but of her potential to change her intentions and, with Allied pressure and surveillance, let go of her virulent nationalism.

Given the German experience of the First World War and the Armistice, these French requirements for ‘moral disarmament’ were almost impossible to meet. In the chaos of defeat, the Treaty was subjected to fierce attacks from politicians, the military and a wide swathe of the public. This opposition was carefully scrutinized and


\[^{8}Barros, ‘France and the German Menace’, Ch.1; and Peter Jackson, France and the Nazi Menace, 1933–1939 (Oxford: OUP 2000), 388–9, 391.\]

\[^{9}AMAE, Massigli Papers, Vol.98, Massigli to Hesnard (Berlin), 16 Apr. 1920.\]

\[^{10}Ulrich Heinemann, Die verdrängte Niederlage: Politische Öffentlichkeit und Kriegsschuldfrage in Der Weimarer Republik (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht 1983).\]
catalogued by French intelligence. For example, a 1924 report by the Deuxième Bureau on German political parties opened with the observation that ‘all Germans, without exception, are agreed on declaring the Versailles Treaty unenforceable’.\textsuperscript{11} Germany’s inability to ‘embrace defeat’ was hardly surprising and provided a never-ending list of violations for those in Paris charged with analysing the country’s re-emergence.\textsuperscript{12}

Given what the French interpretation of the Treaty demanded, it was hardly surprising that from the beginning they found problems with German compliance. And problems there were. What was often lost in this debate was the extent of German compliance, for in the French view any progress Germany made towards restoring its economy, every infraction observed by the IMCC, was a step down the road to war. The Deuxième Bureau compiled extensive reports outlining what they argued was a massive German effort at evading the disarmament regime. These estimates were in part based on actual German violations. For example, the IMCC discovered 342 finished and 250 unfinished 105mm barrels in an artillery factory in Saxony in 1921. Given the Deuxième Bureau’s lack of confidence in the Control Commission, discoveries such as this, when analysed by French intelligence, led to ever-greater estimates of German evasion. French calculations of German strength spiralled.

As early as 1920 French intelligence reported that Germany could mobilize not just the 100,000 man army permitted by the Versailles regime but a number of non-military government forces like the police and civic guard, as well as over 2,000,000 men from private associations. With the recent and rapid organization of the Freikorps in mind, it was felt that these 2.4 million men, all volunteers, could be mobilized immediately. Because over 7 million Germans had fought in the war, the Deuxième Bureau estimated that this 2.4 million volunteer army would have trained reserves of over 4 million men.\textsuperscript{13} These sorts of estimates continued to be made throughout the 1920s.

\textsuperscript{11}SHAT, 7N2614, no.2, ‘Attitude des divers partis Allemands à l’égard de la France’, 29 Feb. [1924].
\textsuperscript{12}Contrast this experience with post-1945 Japan and the American occupation regime. See John Dower, \textit{Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II} (New York: W.W. Norton 1999).
The bulk of the French estimate, the 2 million-strong patriotic associations of various sorts, was based simply on taking these groups at their most inflated word, in large part relying on their publications and public gatherings. A telling example of French views of German ‘spirit’ can be seen in one Deuxème Bureau report that discussed these organizations: ‘our most redoubtable adversary’, as they pursued ‘with tenacity and method the preparation and mobilization of all the national forces’. 14

The reality was somewhat different. It was not until 1923 that Germany began major efforts to prepare for the clandestine production of arms and training of troops. The Deuxième Bureau was not completely wrong but German evasions of Versailles in this period did not greatly change the military balance of power. In 1927 Joachim von Stülpnagel, head of the de facto General Staff’s army operations department, gave a talk at the Reich Defence Ministry. Stülpnagel pointed out that, ‘for the foreseeable future, to start a war would be a mere heroic gesture’. The seven extant divisions of the German army had enough ammunition for roughly one hour of combat. 15

Nor did the French expect war to come soon. The alarming intelligence estimates underscored the long-term threat, calling attention to a moment sometime in the future when Germany would be even better placed to take her revenge. But German intentions were clear. In testimony before the National Assembly’s Commission de l’Armée and Commission des Affaires Étrangères, André Lefèvre, the minister of war, and the military leadership repeatedly made the point that Germany was complying only to the extent she was forced to. 16

For the French the experience of total war meant disarmament had to go beyond the increasingly artificial divisions between military and civil. More importantly, disarmament had to go beyond the material to include the psychological question of intentions. Even if Germany had

complied with the material requirements of disarmament, it would not necessarily be engaging in ‘moral disarmament’. The more difficult issue of the extent of German evasions often got lost because for France the question was to some extent moot once Germany’s intransigence became clear. In the absence of compliance, French disarmament of Germany required massive coercion, something the French could not do alone. The failure of this approach was in large part due to the fact that the French definition of disarmament was unable to bridge the strategic divide of the Channel, a divide the war had not managed to narrow.

Great Britain adopted a very different definition of disarmament, one that can be summed up as being ‘continental containment and engagement’. Like France’s approach, it was a reflection of Britain’s strategic interests. Geography and the war had left Prime Minister David Lloyd George and the British government much less concerned about the German threat compared to worries over America, Bolshevik Russia, or France. If anything, Germany needed to be quickly disarmed, and the definition needed to be limited and clear, so the country could rapidly return to its place in the concert of nations and assist in checking Soviet Russia and post-war France. This equilibrium would help Britain deal with the myriad problems facing it and the Empire. The disarmament of Germany had temporal as well as absolute limits. In general, the British defined German disarmament as the short-term removal or destruction of equipment combined with controls on the size of her armed forces. They did not, however, consider it to be the end of German military power. As the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, noted in February 1919, while the negotiations were being conducted at Versailles, Germany needed to be ‘sufficiently strong to be no temptation to the French!’ German militarism was seen as a problem, but one that could be dealt with by constructive engagement rather than coercion. Disarmament would limit Germany’s immediate military power and thus allow for the nation’s orderly return to the international system. This narrow definition of the disarmament process would also help to contain the obstreperous French and their desire for an inspection regime that

18 See, for example, Briand’s early analysis in AAN, Assemblée Nationale, CAE, 17 Feb. 1920.
would drag out the process of German compliance, thereby helping to maintain French continental superiority.

These sentiments were clearly expressed by the influential cabinet secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey, in a note to Lloyd George in March 1919:

The Peace Terms as they are developing not only avowedly deprive Germany of the physical force required to resist external attack (which is more likely to come from Bolshevism than any other quarter) but they deprive Germany of every atom of self-respect and reduce her morale to a point at which she may be incapable of resisting the other and perhaps more dangerous weapon of Bolshevism namely propaganda.

The British came late to the idea of German disarmament and Hankey’s comments on the duration of the disarmament regime reflected the general desire of those in Whitehall to make the experience as quick and painless as possible. Germany’s culpability for the war ‘should be brought home to the German people by imposing very drastic penalties at the outset but by limiting the time within which the majority of them should operate’. The ‘appearance of vindictiveness’ was to be avoided. Germany should know from the beginning of the disarmament process that she was destined to return as a full participant in European politics, and as a member of the newly founded League of Nations.20

German naval disarmament was the one question that directly affected British security and strategic interests. Here London’s concern offered the possibility of mirroring Paris’s calculations. Yet the strategy of Lloyd George and his government undercut French hopes and demonstrated just how difficult it was to find common ground between the two Allies. The idea of German naval disarmament had received little discussion in London during the war, in part because the conflict had not been expected to be resolved during 1918. By 1919 Lloyd George was faced with the challenge of maintaining British naval superiority in the face of an ever more powerful United States. The destruction of German naval power was thus not the solution to Lloyd George’s, and the Admiralty’s, key concern. Germany was not the long-term naval menace to Great Britain that it had been in the late nineteenth century. Resolving the naval problem meant dealing with Washington and using President Woodrow Wilson’s ideals of

20LG [Lloyd George papers, House of Lords Record Office], F/24/4/39, Hankey to PM [Prime Minister], 19 Mar. 1919 (emphasis in original); see also David Stevenson’s article in this collection.
disarmament and a League of Nations to help curtail American naval construction. This was combined with Lloyd George’s view that Germany’s economy could and must revive, in which case so would her military potential. These views coalesced in his Fontainebleau memorandum of March 1919, in which he stated:

France itself has demonstrated that those who say you can make Germany so feeble that she will never be able to hit back are utterly wrong... You may strip Germany of her colonies, reduce her armaments to a mere police force and her navy to that of a fifth-rate power; all the same in the end if she feels that she has been unjustly treated in the peace of 1919 she will find means of exacting retribution.\(^{21}\)

Far from provoking the British to push for a long-term and strict control of German naval disarmament, the German threat reinforced the British desire for a rapid disarmament. The sailors of the High Seas Fleet reduced still further the complexity of British calculations by scuttling their ships in June 1919 rather than see the fleet fall permanently into Allied hands. British concern was with its future competitors, namely the United States and Japan. A long-term control regime that would prolong the humiliation of Germany and delay the return of a European balance of power was counter-productive to that strategy. French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau rightly pointed out that Lloyd George’s call for general disarmament was a policy that, while sounding altruistic, was constructed to dovetail with British interests. General disarmament put pressure on American naval construction, on the French army and air force, and reinforced the status quo of Britain’s naval superiority.\(^{22}\) British concern over the German navy did not resemble French fear of German land and air armaments. The enforced naval disarmament of Germany was also easier to verify. The IMCC was not likely to discover battleships and submarines being covertly produced during snap inspections of German factories, nor could Germany simply stock them away ready to be employed the next time the country mobilized.

General disarmament, even if unattained, furthered British policy and so had to be insulated from French attempts to use the IMCC as a tool for controlling Germany. As Lord Robert Cecil, the British


blockade minister during the war and a staunch supporter of the League of Nations, put it in 1919:

The League of Nations must not be converted as the French wish (I am told that the proposal comes really from [French Marshal Ferdinand] Foch) into an alliance against Germany... It would surely be better to assign the duty of enforcing our terms of peace on Germany to some inter-allied body.23

So from the beginning the IMCC was torn between the conflicting desires of its parents. Since its members were drawn from the victorious powers under the leadership of French General Charles Nollet, the IMCC became embroiled in these disputes.24 The impact of these clashes can be seen clearly in three important areas: differing Allied intelligence assessments of German compliance, Anglo-French disputes over a post-IMCC verification and inspection regime, and the role of the IMCC in accelerating the deterioration in Anglo-French relations.

II

The search for ‘moral disarmament’ led France, and French intelligence, to investigate and consider factors well beyond those that had been thought relevant to judging a country’s military preparedness. It also ran counter to the British understanding of what disarmament was, thereby increasing London’s suspicion of French motives and further fraying the alliance.

This process was exacerbated by the experience of ‘total war’. Following the massive mobilization practised in 1914–18, calculations of military power had become much more complicated as economic, technological and social factors became increasingly important in assessing a country’s might. Part of this new reality was reflected in the Versailles Treaty. For example, Article 177 forbid German university societies, sporting associations and other civic groups from ‘occupy[ing] themselves with any military matters’ or allowing instruction in the

23LG, F/6/6/17, Robert Cecil to PM, 10 Mar. 1919.
‘profession or use of arms’. They were to have no ‘connection’ with the German War Ministry or other military bodies. As enforcing Article 177 would show, the wider the definition of what constituted disarmament, the more open the process and intelligence assessments became to conflicting interpretations and dispute.

In their efforts to judge the extent of German disarmament, the Deuxième Bureau followed the IMCC reports from Berlin with tremendous interest. French officers seconded to the IMCC stayed in contact with their colleagues in Paris, and Nollet himself made frequent reports to Foch, who in turn was responsible to the Council of Ambassadors and the Allied governments. Very quickly the Deuxième Bureau came to doubt that the IMCC was effective. Most importantly, there was the question of German resistance, which immediately darkened the lens through which the French judged German actions. Allied divisions further increased German resistance. After the French re-occupation of the Ruhr in 1923, the IMCC was unable to function in Germany and its return was only made possible by a painful negotiation in which the British and German desire for a quick resolution of the question was made clear. As the IMCC slipped away, French worries and estimates of German power only increased. As one 1924 Deuxième Bureau report put it, ‘since 1922 the Control Commission has obtained no results’. The Prime Minister, Raymond Poincaré, who had led France into the Ruhr, saw the IMCC’s problems in 1923 as ‘very grave symptoms of the state of the German spirit’.

The IMCC’s troubles increased the weight that the Deuxième Bureau put on what was known of German violations. The diminished power of inspections meant that the potential for Germany to hide, secretly produce and import arms was rising and had never been effectively dealt with. In its search for evidence the Deuxième Bureau did not hesitate to cast its net widely, examining everything from reports of paramilitary organizations stocking weapons, to commercial contacts between German companies and those outside the country like Fokker in Holland. French fears were not without

27 SHAT, 7N3615, Poincaré to M. le Min[istre] de la Guerre, No.2497, 13 Nov. 1923. For the IMCC’s problems in Germany, see ibid., carton 4N94.
Intelligence on actual weapons, training, and the troubling question of economic power and eventual military production extended into even grayer areas the search for answers to the problem of Germany’s ‘moral disarmament’. Physical fitness was one. The Deuxième Bureau saw the large number of German sporting associations, which engaged in everything from gymnastics to gliding, as yet another manifestation of the lack of ‘moral disarmament’. Despite severe economic difficulties the German government’s investments in sports facilities and associations demonstrated that revenge was the order of the day. Current resistance meant future war, as yet another generation was being trained to go into battle.

The French commissioner in the Rhine, Paul Tirard, went even further when he reported in 1922 on the teaching of singing in German primary schools. The process was important since it provided instruction in the ‘mother tongue’, ‘useful’ exercise for the lungs, and the ‘popular songs’ were ‘an initiation into the legendary patrimony of this historic nation’. Tirard’s analysis reflected a more general concern that Germany’s intentions were most clearly seen in the education of its children. The Deuxième Bureau kept a close eye on what was taught to German students, with the history curriculum being a key indicator. In 1924 General Bernard Serrigny was so disturbed by reports of the ‘dangers that result from the presence of the nationalism that reigns in the German school and university’ that he pushed for an even more extensive investigation of the question. The French view of disarmament brought increased British and German resistance, isolating France and providing yet more evidence of bad faith in a compromise process that was almost doomed to increase divisions. French fears of German school children being taught to sing did little to restore Anglo-French understanding.

The contrast with British intelligence reports on German disarmament is startling. For example, the Committee of Imperial Defence’s paper prepared for the Washington Conference of 1921 painted a very different, and much happier, view of the IMCC’s work and the

extent to which disarmament had been accomplished. The British evaluation was that ‘considerable progress has been made up to date in the fulfilment of these measures’. While accepting that German compliance was not complete, there was little, if any, belief in the French view of a massive and well-orchestrated evasion. The British perspective was best summed up when dealing with the question of Germany’s procuring civilian aircraft that could later be converted to military use: ‘There is nothing to prevent the rapid conversion of commercial aeroplanes for purposes of war and that in the circumstances it is not practicable to suggest any effective means of aerial limitation of armaments’. The French search for anything beyond the immediately military was, at best, impractical. This did not mean that the British completely turned away from the question of German violations, but the context in which the violations were evaluated was profoundly different from that in France. Intelligence was not going to resolve Anglo-French divisions; rather, it served to reinforce them.

The institutional interests of those involved in producing intelligence exacerbated the Anglo-French divide. The French Deuxième Bureau was in effect the French Army. Compared to the other services it was the Army that counted in questions of German disarmament. France’s security was in essence a terrestrial question. French intelligence was intimately linked to an Army’s understanding of the threat. In Britain those most sympathetic to the French position were also those least well-placed to be heard in Whitehall. The British Army, while far from convinced of the French case, was the least comfortable with the evolution of German disarmament and the return of Germany as a military power on the continent. Even had they had more influence it is difficult to see the Army overcoming the calculations of their colleagues in the Navy and Air Force, much less their political masters.

In the narrow confines of enforced disarmament, intelligence had little ability to change the direction of events. As with the differing French and British strategies and definitions of disarmament, interests and beliefs held greater sway, particularly at a time when war, however disconcerting, was still some ways off in the future.

33 [Kew, The National Archives], ADM[iralty papers]/116/3445, CID Paper 280-B.
34 Ibid.
The Anglo-French debate over the extent of German compliance with the requirements of the Versailles Treaty was important not just for those attempting to enforce it, but for those who sought to establish a larger institutional framework for German and international disarmament. A central question for both groups was the role of verification and inspection in the disarmament process. The frustration over the IMCC as having failed because of lack of enforcement, or because it was too demanding, gave rise to historical ‘lessons’ that advocated for caution and against compromise. While the mid and late 1920s saw a political climate that appeared to be dramatically improving, the question of disarmament remained divisive and a test of the extent of European reconciliation.36

A central problem in general disarmament was the fact that preparations for war could be fairly well hidden. As a 1924 French military study showed, a programme involving preparations for economic and military mobilization and the stockpiling of munitions and important raw materials could reduce ‘to a few months’ the time needed to properly equip a modern German army. This was a ‘very dangerous’ situation. French intelligence needed roughly the same amount of time to detect the start of weapons production. Given the potential to conceal, for disarmament to be effective there needed to be a post-IMCC surveillance of Germany. In turn, for this regime to be able to properly ensure Germany’s disarmament, it needed to have extensive powers to search purported civilian companies and organizations in order to make sure they were not involved in military preparations.

This League of Nations-based organization needed the right to conduct surprise inspections, because that was the only reliable way to ensure that illegal conduct could be unmasked. The ‘experience’ of enforced disarmament, undoubtedly referring to the IMCC, had shown that what was needed was impartiality of surveillance and severe punishment of any infractions. A poorly enforced disarmament regime was ‘doubly dangerous’. First, it fostered ‘revenge’ and ‘xenophobia’ amongst those being disarmed, as they began to see just how much power they had thanks to their ability to subvert the poorly run control regime. Second, an ineffective control regime might be worse than no control regime at all since it could mislead the victors into the illusion of disarmament.

For disarmament to work, ‘visible’ aspects of military power, such as army units, and ‘clandestine measures’, such as the training of troops via sporting organizations, needed to be strictly monitored. Attention to the former would be rendered moot if the latter were allowed to develop. In order to put a stop to covert efforts at subverting the Versailles regime, the control authorities needed the element of surprise. To be effective, disarmament required control of the preparations that brought about the ‘material and moral mobilization’ of the country’s resources.37

This had been France’s view from the very beginning, and like so many other policies regarding Germany it had met with quick British opposition. In the 1920 Allied talks over disarmament, it appeared to the French that British policy was not to discuss the right of investigation, since they did not want to ‘permit “a sword of Damocles to be suspended over the head of Germany”’. 38 In fact, for many in France the IMCC was simply a preliminary phase in a much longer-term surveillance of German military power. The scale envisaged, decades at least, reflected the nature of the threat. As Foch wrote in 1922, it would be dangerous to replace the IMCC with a League-directed effort that made use of only ‘intermittent investigations’. Surveillance should be uninterrupted and ‘prolonged’, so that Germany’s military power would require years to be reconstituted, thus allowing plenty of time for France to react. 39 In 1924 Poincaré would return to this idea and underline the importance of having a League-based system of surprise inspections. 40

This helps explains the importance France placed on Article 213 of the Versailles Treaty. It stated that ‘so long as the present Treaty remains in force Germany undertakes to give every facility for any investigations’ authorized by the Council of the League of Nations. Like the IMCC’s mission in Germany, it offered France the hope of installing a disarmament system that would reflect their definition and principles, and so reinforce their security. The French required an organization that would be permanently based in Germany, since only that way could they really conduct surprise visits. 41 However, as with

39Note du Maréchal Foch’, 25 Mar. 1922, ibid; Foch to Poincaré, no.76/1, 18 Feb. 1924, ibid.
41Réquin, ‘Exercice du droit d’investigation’ (see note 40).
so many other aspects of the Treaty, its ambiguity reflected political divisions that when tested by the need for specific policies gave rise to disparate interpretations.42

In 1923 Nollet had emphasized that the work of the IMCC made clear the need for a long-term disarmament strategy towards Germany via the League of Nations. His analysis of the disarmament problem combined the material and the moral with an emphasis on the latter. While the German people were not anxious for another conflict, they still had a ‘tendency’ to believe what their leaders told them. In time they would be prepared to return to the front. As for the German elites, military, political and intellectual, they ‘could not change’ and so the key objective was to circumscribe their power over the population. Only over a period of decades would the current leadership disappear and the possibility of a more peaceful Germany emerge.43

The French need for an extensive and long-term surveillance of Germany that demonstrated Allied determination to force German compliance, and thus change the country, had only been reinforced by the IMCC experience.44 A 1924 French assessment of the IMCC’s work had come to the conclusion that, while some results ‘were far from negligible’, the Allied accord negotiated to allow the IMCC’s return after the Ruhr crisis had undercut whatever ability it had retained to truly verify German compliance. That agreement, which required Allied unanimity and gave a great deal of time to German authorities, meant that the IMCC’s ‘real effectiveness is null’ given that they had in essence ‘lost’ the ability to conduct surprise inspections. A ‘number of indices’ indicated a ‘methodical military reorganization’ of German forces.45

A War Office study later that year underscored how similar views did not necessarily lead to the same conclusions. While Germany did not ‘present an immediate military danger’ it was clear that ‘her potential power is very great’. The War Office agreed on the necessity for close Allied cooperation and in the danger of Germany not being ‘morally disarmed’:

42Note, 5 June 1924; Foch to Poincaré, no.76/1, 18 Feb. 1924; Poincaré to Serrigny, 8 Feb. 1924, ibid.; and Salewski, Entwaffnung und Militärkontrolle in Deutschland, 268–70.
if the political orientation of Germany as indicated by the Press and public utterances of leading men is warlike there can be little doubt that efforts will be made sooner or later to provide the means for making war...[the General Staff saw] the German nation as a primitive people scientifically equipped – vigorous, prolific, and unscrupulous, combining the height of modern efficiency with the mentality and brutality of the middle ages.

Once the IMCC departed there would only be two ways of keeping track of German economic and military preparations for war: the first, a League of Nations organization operating under the authority of Article 213, which ‘as yet cannot be relied upon’; the second was the intelligence services of Allied governments. German ‘militarist spirit’ could be detected by careful observation and, once uncovered, ‘intense activity’ by intelligence organizations could focus on finding covert economic and military preparations for war.46 As relatively Francophile as the General Staff was, even their views fell short of what their French counterparts insisted were the minimum requirements for German disarmament and Allied security. The IMCC’s forced departure from Germany, the need for surprise inspections, the importance of continuous surveillance from a permanent organization stationed in the country, all gave way to a more general desire to maintain a close watch on events.

Just as France searched for German ‘moral disarmament’, it sought British ‘moral armament’ and, as the Foreign Office’s Miles Lampson pointed out, ‘French public opinion...regards us as morally committed’ to them. The problem was that ‘real’ security, as defined by the French, was ‘almost unobtainable’: ‘You cannot keep a people of seventy millions permanently under a control regime.47 The same could be said for the French definition of disarmament.

The Allied disunity that had eroded the IMCC was clearly going to be a difficulty in implementing a League of Nations system to correct for its ineffectiveness. As one French military study written in 1924 pointed out, at the same time that the necessity of a firm control regime was being reaffirmed there was also the recognition that the political situation was shifting decisively against France: ‘Today evidence of German culpability is not universally admitted’. There was the danger


47FO/371/9820, C16913/2048/18, jacket minutes, Lampson, 5 Nov. 1924; C9313/2072/18, Lampson to D’Abernon, 23 June 1924; and BL [British Library, London], Curzon Papers, MSS Eur F 112/247, Memorandum by Lampson, 11 Jan. 1924 (emphasis in original).
that investigations by the League of Nations would not be ‘animated by a spirit that corresponds exactly with French interpretations of the Treaty’ and could even offer the possibility of ‘dangerous manoeuvres’ by France’s enemies.  

The IMCC had travelled a long and complicated route. The early initial success had quickly given way to disputes, as easy-to-fulfil requirements, such as the handing over of weaponry and the destruction of fixed installations, gave way to much more subjective, intrusive and disputed demands that provoked greater German resistance. The return of the IMCC after the Ruhr crisis was only achieved by French compromise. With the arrival of Locarno in 1925, France’s ability to defend the idea of an active and extensive IMCC control regime was further weakened. In December 1926, agreement was reached to close down the IMCC the following month. At the same time a definition of Article 213 was arrived at, one that did not include a permanent surveillance organization. For France, enforced disarmament was indeed worse than no disarmament at all.

IV

The disarmament question sullied Anglo-French relations, exasperating both sides, and provided an ongoing source of further mistrust and disenchantment. The result was an even more precipitous deterioration of Anglo-French relations before Locarno, and an important constraint on improving relations between Paris and London afterwards. An extreme example of this was British Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon, who in 1922 vehemently complained of ‘the inherent perfidy and insincerity of French policy’. France’s ambition resulted in Britain being ‘regarded as too friendly towards Germany’. While ‘the Germans had taken advantage of this and behaved badly particularly in regard to disarmament’, it was clear that the culprit was France’s dangerously unrestrained thirst for greater power. She desired to gain security, and predominance on the continent, through the control of Germany provided by the IMCC.

That same year, in a memorandum given to Lloyd George, Arthur Balfour, then Lord President of the Council, offered a polite echo of Curzon’s views. He argued that the French would not disarm even if the

50 [Kew, The National Archives], CAB[inet papers]/23/32, Cab. 64 (22), 1 Nov. 1922.
British provided a guarantee because ‘they will never be contented with anything which the British Empire are prepared to give’. As French policy on the IMCC helped show, its insecurity outstripped any reasonable British response.

The general French distrust of German disarmament did not stifle debate over the extent to which compliance was occurring. For example, sharp French questions in the Chamber of Deputies were noted by London, as well as the need by those who governed in Paris to reconcile their unhappiness regarding German disarmament with their growing need to cut their own defence expenditures and balance the budget. Prime Minister Georges Leygues was attacked in the Chamber by critics like Louis Barthou, who along with French intelligence did not lack for evidence of Germany’s failures to comply with the IMCC. French divisions on the question did little to encourage British, or French, compromise and so assist Anglo-French reconciliation.

The 1920s saw a profound change in French policy towards Germany. The confrontation of the early post-war period gave way, particularly after the resolution of the French-led reoccupation of the Ruhr of 1923, to constructive engagement with Berlin during the Locarno era. While French foreign policy changed, the basic definition and understanding of what German disarmament meant and required did not. As Poincaré stated in 1927, ‘material disarmament does not suffice’; what was needed was ‘moral disarmament’. The Maginot line was on the horizon.

The immediate material disarmament of Germany was, on the whole, accomplished. The ‘moral’ disarmament of Germany was not. But surely that was a task well beyond a system resting on a balance of power, a system in which the country being disarmed had the will, ability and desire to resist. Enforced disarmament via inspection, compared to occupation or immediate normalization, was perhaps the least hopeful way to increase Germany’s ‘thirst’ for ‘moral’ disarmament. It did little for Allied dialogue and mutual comprehension. Its application after 1919 brought some material successes at considerable political cost. Enforced disarmament of post-1919 Europe exacerbated, rather than helped to resolve, the problems of pre-1919 Europe. It

quickly fell victim to forces it had little ability to control and only
seemed to influence for the worse. The enforced disarmament as set out
at Versailles required conditions that simply were not present after the
experience of 1914–18. Subjected to conflicting French and British post-
war strategies, it provided part of the script for a dialogue of the deaf.

V

Those disarming have a basic choice to make: to attempt ‘moral
disarmament’, long-term control over the defeated power’s capability
and intentions, or ‘containment’, an effort to effect reasonable control
over key aspects of military power. Applying these categories to the Anglo-
French experience and Iraq raises three noteworthy points of comparison.

First, in both cases the Allies started with one type of control regime and
then, in the face of resistance and changing strategies, shifted their
disarmament objectives. Between 1919 and 1928, France was forced to
move from ‘moral disarmament’ to ‘containment’ with the attendant hope
of constructive engagement. In Iraq, the United States started with a policy
of vigorous ‘containment’ that, particularly after September 11, moved
towards a policy of ‘moral disarmament’. In each case, the capacity of the
vanquished to resist was grossly underestimated. This resistance gained
strength from Allied divisions, perhaps most importantly those over just
how far towards ‘moral disarmament’ the control regime should go.

Second, lacking a carefully agreed upon and effective definition of the
enforcement regime and facing increasing resistance, the Allies quickly
fell out over how to proceed. Enforced disarmament was an immediate
test of alliance politics – of Allied consensus and resolve. It was also a
litmus test of the occupied’s desire and ability to resist. These Allied
differences were exacerbated, not resolved, by conflicting intelligence
assessments. The search for ‘moral disarmament’ expanded French, and
American, intelligence’s not so difficult search for resistance and led it
away from attempts to assess the extent to which the containment
regime was a success.

Finally, the more willing a country is to seek ‘moral disarmament’ the
more threatened it feels. French insistence on German ‘moral
disarmament’, like the United States view of Iraq after September 11,
reflected a deep sense of threat that could not be easily addressed
though ‘containment’. The need for ‘moral disarmament’ was an
indicator of how indecisive the war that had preceded it had been.

54Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction (London 2004) [Butler
Report]; Towle, Enforced Disarmament, 193–201; and Kenneth M. Pollack, The
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